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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 001483

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TURKMEN FOREIGN MINISTER POSITIVE ABOUT RELATIONS;
URGES DIPLOMATIC SOLUTION IN AFGHANISTAN

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. In a November 16 meeting with Deputy Assistant Secretary of State George Krol, Deputy Chairman and Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov provided his perspective on the current state of U.S.-Turkmenistan relations and the path ahead. He commented on our increasingly active political dialogue, but provided little concrete feedback on the upcoming bilateral consultations. Meredov spoke positively about recent activities by the U.S.-Turkmenistan Business Council to develop commercial ties. He had little positive comment on the AUCA student and Peace Corps issues, but urged DAS Krol to raise them with President Berdimuhamedov. Turning to regional issues, Meredov reiterated the Turkmen government view that problems in Afghanistan need to be resolved by peaceful means, preferably under UN auspices. He remarked generally about the importance of maintaining continuous negotiations among all five countries bordering the Caspian, and did not rule out bilateral talks to resolve Turkmen-Azeri issues. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Meredov began by noting the good impetus to bilateral relations generated by President Berdimuhamedov's trip to New York for the UN General Assembly. Citing other high-level meetings by US and Turkmenistan officials during the past six months, he noted that the bilateral political dialogue is on a higher level. He hoped the planned bilateral consultations would be an effective forum. He agreed in principle to meeting in January 2010 in Washington and said the Turkmen side would continue examining the matter and let the U.S. side know about the staffing of the Turkmen delegation, suggestions for concrete agenda items and dates. As possible agenda items, he mentioned further development of the political dialogue, discussion of regional and international issues as well as cooperation in the educational, cultural and humanitarian spheres. Meredov also raised the possibility of a meeting between Presidents Obama and Berdimuhamedov in 2010, urging the U.S. side to look at the scheduling possibilities for such a meeting.

¶3. (C) DAS Krol noted that the Secretary was satisfied with her meeting with Berdimuhamedov. Regarding the bilateral consultations, Krol emphasized the need to move from words to action. He stressed that the two sides should work together

on the consultations as a follow-up to the UNGA visit. DAS Krol suggested that discussion of security issues also be included in the agenda. Meredov said the Turkmen side would consider it, noting some positive cooperation in anti-terrorism efforts. He acknowledged the approaching expiration of the overflight agreement and said renewal is currently under consideration.

14. (C) Turning to commercial and economic relations, Meredov said the Turkmen were happy with the U.S.-Turkmenistan Business Council's (USTBC) recent activities. He noted that the recent business forum held in Ashgabat, while not involving a large number of U.S. companies, was a "start," and the Turkmen side would like to see this activity continued. He mentioned some U.S. companies, such as Boeing and John Deere, that already have trade relations with Turkmenistan. He added that there have been interesting proposals from U.S. companies in the areas of energy, agricultural processing, petrochemicals, and tourism, and that the Turkmen side is ready to consider such proposals. DAS Krol noted that the U.S. also wants to expand our economic and commercial ties beyond the oil and gas sector.

15. (C) The Foreign Minister characterized cultural and educational activities as an area in which we have had positive experience. He said that, regarding "several issues that are known to you and us, we will work on this in the near term." (Note: Meredov was referring to the American University of Central Asia students and Peace Corps volunteers. End Note) Concerning the students, who have been denied permission to depart for studies at the American

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University in Bulgaria, Meredov urged DAS Krol to raise the student issue with Berdimuhamedov during their meeting on the following day. Meredov also recommended that DAS Krol raise the Peace Corps issue with the president. He elaborated on the Peace Corps situation, saying that the government's last minute decision to postpone the arrival of the incoming group of volunteers was related to the fact the work places for the volunteers would not be ready in time. Meredov stated that there was no change in the policy of the Turkmen government towards the Peace Corps program. He continued by noting that, if the volunteers were coming to work in education and health care, they should be qualified specialists in these fields, in order to avoid "misunderstandings." He commented that sometimes there has been a teacher that was not fully trained and that, just because someone was an English speaker, that person was not necessarily a specialist. He thought that was an issue that needed to be addressed. DAS Krol suggested that there could be new areas for Peace Corps programs, such as tourism and small and medium enterprise development, perhaps staffed with retired U.S. business people. The Foreign Minister concluded on the Peace Corps issue by saying that Peace Corps should understand the reason behind the Turkmen government action and that, in his view, the Peace Corps needed to show maximum flexibility in the number of volunteers. He stated that he was not a supporter of drastic measures and always wanted to proceed with mutual understanding in dealing with these issues, noting that more consultation would also be an opportunity to development the relationship.

16. (C) Regarding regional issues, particularly Afghanistan and the Caspian, Meredov noted these were issues on the agenda of the international community, and not just Turkmenistan's concerns. He described Afghanistan as a neighbor with whom Turkmenistan cooperates, particularly in the humanitarian sphere, building schools and clinics in rural areas. The Turkmen government wants its assistance to be relevant and wants to see the results, but it does not publicize its efforts in order to receive recognition. Its motive is to support the ethnic Turkmen and other ethnic groups in Afghanistan as neighbors. He noted that the Turkmen government did not cut delivery of electricity when the Afghans could not pay, but rather forgave the debt. He

indicated that Turkmenistan stands ready to expand its power stations and build new power transmission lines to the TX-AF border, at its own expense. It would do this even though the sale of the electricity would not be particularly profitable for the Turkmen. A second Turkmen proposal was to extend the railroad line 85 kilometers to the Afghan border, with the possibility of construction of a terminal for loading and unloading cargo for road transport. According to Meredov, the Afghans did not respond to this offer.

17. (C) Noting that Turkmenistan does not interfere in Afghanistan's internal affairs, Meredov mentioned that both at UNGA and at a subsequent press conference in Ashgabat, Berdimuhamedov said the Afghanistan problem needs to be resolved by peaceful, diplomatic means. A military solution would not have a positive result. Turkmenistan, as a UN member, would be ready to work under UN guidance, whatever format that would involve, but only through political and practical measures. Meredov pointed out that, while there has been war in Afghanistan for more than 30 years, the TX-AF border has always remained "normal." Ethnic Turkmen live across the border and are a tolerant people that are somewhat integrated in the Afghan system. They do not lean towards fringe groups, but play a balancing role in order to maintain stability. Meredov suggested that all parties in Afghanistan want peace, but that factionalism makes it complicated. He acknowledged that dangerous groups have reached Northern Afghanistan. He asked about the U.S. view of the situation, mentioning the conflicting points of view of various U.S. officials reported in the media. DAS Krol described discussions taking place in Washington on this issue, and the general agreement that a solely military solution would not

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work. He questioned how to establish stability and social reconciliation by diplomatic, peaceful means and noted that the solution ultimately lies in the hands of the Afghan people. Meredov averred that the issue requires consultations. The Turkmen government thinks some mechanisms could be more actively pursued in order to achieve a diplomatic outcome.

18. (C) Meredov said the Caspian also poses complicated issues, and that each Caspian Basin country had its own views. He said the questions are not just energy related, but that the Caspian should be "a sea of friendship and neighborliness." Security could not be divided as separate national, regional and global interests. Similarly, security involves a unified whole, and includes a range of issues such as energy, commerce, the environment and defense. Meredov said the Turkmen government views the Caspian in that way. He mentioned that Berdimuhamedov had proposed a conference on the disarmament of the Caspian Basin, to be held in Ashgabat under UN auspices. Meredov also said the Caspian countries were still working on an instrument that would provide a legal basis for resolving their issues. The five Caspian countries are working together on multiple projects in order to continue the momentum and tempo of their negotiations, a kind of permanent dialogue.

19. (C) Economic relations and geopolitical issues can be addressed in a parallel manner, according to Meredov. He cited the example of a railroad ferry agreement reached between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. Such agreements can be reached bilaterally, without involving all Caspian countries. The Foreign Minister said demarcation of the boundary with Azerbaijan and the exploitation of Caspian resources are separate questions. The Turkmen will not approve any unilateral activity for developing resources in disputed areas as long as there is no agreement. Meredov added that the Turkmen threat to submit the boundary dispute to arbitration did not mean that Turkmen-Azeri relations were wrecked. Not seeing progress in their negotiations, they took a civilized path to resolving the issue. But the Turkmen government would continue negotiations.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: Meredov's lack of comment on the Peace Corps issue and especially the fate of the AUCA students, combined with his suggestion that DAS Krol raise the issues with Berdimuhamedov, indicates that these problems arose in the education sector and are not in the purview of the Foreign Minister to fix. The lack of specific feedback on the bilateral consultation mechanism also indicates the limits of the Foreign Minister. These issues are examples of the extent of control wielded by Berdimunhamedov within the Turkmen bureaucracy. In addition to signing off on all significant matters under the purview of the various deputy chairmen, he also serves as the sole recourse to resolve issues that fall under the control of other parts of government, but impact Turkmenistan's foreign relations. END COMMENT.

¶11. (U) DAS Krol has cleared this cable.
CURRAN